
From the Front Lines A Personal View of Information Operations on the Battlefield

Calculated Information Operations at the Tactical Level

by Major John J. Zollinger

As the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) Information Operations (IO) Officer, I had the opportunity to be a part of an operation, which we are still reading about today; a capture/kill operation which took place in Shindand, western Afghanistan in August 2008. My goal and objectives in assisting this operation were not to repeat what we did in Zerko valley in 2007, which was, to be on the defense regarding the information flow, and the enemy beating our IO with their propaganda of inflated civilian casualties.

We needed to get our message out ahead of the Taliban, and discredit their propaganda before they could discredit our

information and press releases. Based on the human intelligence and signals intelligence information going into this mission, I was able to better understand the tribal dynamics within the area and understand how the tribes were able to project their information through Shuras or engagements between tribal leaders and elders. Understanding the tribes and providing the tactical commander talking points, as well as, other things to consider prior to a key leader engagement (KLE) greatly increase the ability to collect valuable operational information for future military operations, and to gain a better understanding of the area and build a “tribal engagement” database. This database can be used as a reference tool to assist the IO team to make educated recommendations to other systems of IO,



US Soldiers Patrol Afghan Village

Source: defenseimagery.mil

for example civil affairs (CA) and psychological operations (PSYOP). The database the CJSOTF-A Joint Effects Cell (JEC) developed consisted of non-lethal effects such as KLE, shuras, IED turn-ins as part of the small rewards program, CA projects, humanitarian assistance operations, and medical care operations.

To gain IO synergy throughout the task force there needs to be a constant balance through the basic pillars of IO. The CJSOTF-A JEC consisted of CA, public affairs officer (PAO), and PSYOP. In order for the IO officer to affect the information environment ebb and flow throughout the battlefield space, and at the same time provide strategic information to higher echelons, there needs to be a seamless flow of information throughout the IO channels. The PAO position is an essential part of the tactical commander's non-lethal tool. They are fundamentally the focal point between the military and the public for information.

The most accurate information is just one way to beat the propaganda, but time is of the essence. As the military operation

in Shindand, western Afghanistan started to turn from a lethal to a non-lethal operation, we provided information to the higher command and conducted a sequence of non-lethal events to counter the enemy propaganda. The enemy was able to get their propaganda started before we even left the military objective. As I looked across the villages while I was on a rooftop of one of the key objectives, I was able to see the local nationals on their cell phones and heard the radio saying Coalition Forces have killed over 70 local national civilians.

Similar to Zerko valley in 2007, we were not getting our information out fast enough, through either a press release or a phone call to the strategic level. It took the insurgents approximately 26 minutes to get their propaganda out. The result discredited our operation via the message saying to the rest of Afghanistan that the coalition forces had killed over 70 non-combatants, and at one point the number reached 110 civilians killed. The insurgent message was eventually picked up as fact by global media resulting in more perception damage to the coalition.


As an IO officer, you have to realize false information and propaganda is easy to get out faster than factual or accurate information. Competent planners must realize that planning needs to start prior to the operation regarding the framework of the themes and messages needed to get out to the public; a tool in which we sometime forget is the military decision making process (MDMP). Propaganda is much easier to project, and once the propaganda is in the public media, it is too late for the IO planner to be on the offensive (decide/detect/deliver); now the IO planner is forced to conduct defensive IO or what I call band-aide IO.

Embedded media are a great tool if used correctly to reach the strategic level in order to tell the story of the military and inform the public regarding lethal and non-lethal operations. During my deployment, we embedded numerous journalist and photographers, for example LtCol Oliver North, Fox News "War Stories," National Public Radio (NPR), MSNBC, and a freelance combat camera photographer. Every media embed had their own objectives, either to tell the



Afghan Man Uses New Coalition Provided Water Well
Source: defenseimagery.mil

story of the Afghan people, or be a part of a specific operation to see how the Afghan Commandos operated. The common media theme was to inform the public on what the military does on a daily basis and show the public we are human, and highlight the fact that the local Afghan people want us here to help them make their country a better place and, most importantly, eradicate the insurgents.

Learning from our IO mistakes and documenting the lessons learned is critical. It enables us to avoid the events such as Zerko Valley and Shindand. Non-lethal synchronized operations consisting of KLEs, CA, PSYOP, Combat Camera, and PA will support the time sensitive need for information at the strategic level. Reverse bridging is a great example at the tactical level in order to create the seamless flow of information to the higher echelons. Information received at the HQ CJSOTF-A level is created and processed at the Special Operations Task Force level (SOTF). The JEC plays a critical role in the processing of this information and the speed in which it reaches the strategic level. The speed is critical because the information can be used to counter propaganda and as a mitigation tool. Even though media embeds can be challenging at times, they are a resource that if utilized and coordinated correctly can enhance a unit's non-lethal capability tremendously. As products are developed, and resources are allocated, it is important to stay focused on the underlying factor that the Afghan people are the center of gravity, and truthful information to them and other audiences is critical. 

Editor's Note: Personal accounts are important to any professional field to add context to the academic work and study of a profession. Major Zollinger's article gives us context to realize that IO is not just an academic work, but also a military art form that sometimes is practiced in the toughest of conditions. Therefore, his personal account of his experience in Afghanistan is important and relevant.

